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Educational Factors Influencing Female Students' Dropout from High Schools in Nepal

Tanka Dahal, Keith J Topping, & Susan Levy

Abstract

Female students' retention rate in schools is a serious issue in Nepal, as in other countries. This paper reports on the findings of a qualitative study on the effect of educational factors on female students' retention rates in high schools in Nepal. Data gathering locations were chosen on the basis of female students' dropout rates published in the consolidated report of the Ministry of Education (2011). Face to face interviews were conducted with 96 participants. The findings showed that weakness in policy implementation resulted in low motivation in teachers and students, poor learning achievement and student dropout. The participants mentioned weaknesses such as inadequate scholarship quotas and amounts for female students, impractical scholarship criteria, inadequate teaching and untested methods of evaluation.

Key Words

Nepal, high school, female, dropout, education

Introduction

Access to basic education for all children has been an area of concern for educationalists and policy makers in Nepal. Despite efforts made by the government of Nepal with programmes like Free and Compulsory Primary Education (FCPE), the current literacy rate still shows problems. According to the National Population and Housing Census (NPHC) (Government of Nepal, 2011) the overall literacy rate is 65.9%. The separate figures for male and female show a clear gender gap: male - 75.1%, female - 57.4% (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012). School dropout rates were studied in a consolidated report published by the Ministry of Education (2011), which showed that there was a need for bridging the gender gap in terms of access to education and school attainment. The highest female dropout rate was in Rautahat district and the lowest was Kathmandu (MOE, 2011).

The principal aim of this research was to explore the factors that caused dropouts among female students from high schools in Nepal. In the interviews the participants were asked respond to questions to address the following research questions:

- What impact does the school system, teaching and assessment have on high school girl students' likelihood of dropout?
 - o Is there any conflict between the norms and values inherent in the school system and the targets of learning outcomes set by the curriculum?
 - o Is there any link between the examination system and girl students' dropout?
 - o What socio-cultural factors cause girl students to abandon their schooling early?

Although these questions are seemingly different, they are deeply inter-related. The phenomenon of dropout cannot be examined in isolation. Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued that individuals and their environment are interacting and influencing one another on a continuous basis. Therefore, variables such as examinations, assessment, school system, parents, teachers, society and culture that this study examines are interrelated and related to students' learning behaviour. The social-cultural context influences student behaviour. The educational objectives of a school can bring change in the perspectives of parents and people in the community. The

respondents discussed educational issues, socio-economic and socio-cultural issues in the context of female students' education. This article reports the findings on educational issues.

Review of Literature

A systematic literature review was carried out, exploring diverse aspects of the school system as well as socio-cultural factors in relation to students' school retention and likelihood of dropout. Of 23 studies selected for the review eight focused on the issues relevant to school system. Four studies explored both school and socio-cultural issues and eight studies focused on issues within school system. The inclusion criteria were:

- The study must have been published as a journal article or a book. Or the study must be a major thesis submitted to a university toward a doctoral degree
- The study must have been published after 1990: the rationale for this was Nepal government had taken important steps following the Jomtien World Education Conference (1990).

The study must have discussed:

- ◆ School dropouts in Nepal, with a focus on gender gap
- ◆ School dropouts in Nepal Primary Schools or Secondary Schools, with a focus on girl students' schooling
- ◆ A focus on the school system, curriculum and educational policy in relation to female dropout or dropout in general
- ◆ School dropouts in India or any other South Asian country with similar socio-cultural conditions with a focus on girl students' school attendance and dropout
- ◆ Factors that caused girl students' dropout in Nepal
- ◆ Data or evidence must be included.

Perpetuation of gender discrimination through control and power in educational settings underpins the review of literature. The review explores the way power and social control in relation to gender work within the educational system and the way social relations are

produced, reproduced and transmitted through schooling (Arnot, 2002). The studies reviewed offer an understanding of gender and power relations (Mirembe & Davies, 2010) and their effect on educational gains in schools in Nepal and different parts of the world.

Issues such as gendering in school, an unfavourable school environment for menstruating girls, lack of space within the school where females could maintain their privacy, and lack of female teachers in schools suggests that schools are creating power imbalances within the school system (McGregor, 2006). Rothchild (2005) and Jain (2006) found that reproduction of socio-cultural gender imbalance was a defining characteristic of educational institutions in Nepal and in India. Such findings reinforced an argument that patriarchy and power was the cause of female oppression and female subordination (Arnot, 2002).

The findings of these studies showed that both within-school factors and socio-cultural factors significantly contributed to school dropout. Gender values at home and in the broader social context played a major role. The major gap in the current body of literature is that no study explored the effect of educational factors on female students' school retention or dropout in the context of Nepal.

It was found that schools, rather than promoting equality, perpetuated gender division by reproducing socio-cultural practices and gender-based patterns of behaviour within schools (Acker, 1987). Socio-cultural reproduction theory helps understand how the cultural aspects of gender norms shape domestic, social and educational decisions in favour of male children. Such decisions comprise parental support for daughters' education, individual attention for female students in school, the creation of a female friendly atmosphere in schools and encouragement for females to participate in sports and other social activities.

Rothchild (2005) finds that gendering in social and educational spaces is a persistent determinant of girl students' schooling outcome. Her findings support the inequality theory of socio-cultural reproduction and framing of social identities (Dillabough, 2001). Rothchild's finding from school observation was that children in the classroom often played on gender and teachers paid more attention to boys during classroom teaching. McMahon et al.'s (2011) conclusion regarding menstruating girls in Kenya is in line with Sommer's (2014) argument, that

when menstruating girls continue their schooling, 'a collision occurs in the school environment that continues to be gender discriminatory', resulting in 'an unnecessary, and preventable, interruption to girls' active school participation and attendance' (Jewitt, 2014). The findings of Jain (2006), Seka (2012) and Gahima (2012) reveal significant effects on female students' school retention rates of inadequate teaching and learning materials, poor infrastructural facilities (lack of library, laboratory, electric bulbs and fans, inadequate furniture, lack of play area), classroom shortages in schools (classrooms are overcrowded or classes are held outdoors), a lack of separate gender toilets and the absence of female teachers. The variables used by the studies above related to school infrastructures work against females in the context of the socio-cultural situations of the countries where the studies are conducted. The reason that such factors are more unfavourable to girls than to boys is that they function in a context which is already biased against girls.

Studies that explore the impact of the school system on dropout behaviour look at variables like pupil teacher ratio, government spending per student, educational policy, and ethnic composition. The limitation of these studies is that they do not include the gender element in their analyses. Studies based in the USA also examine the effects of the Minimum Competency Test, General Equivalent Diploma (GED), Higher Competency Test, and availability of an option called Alternate Pathways for under achievers. Some studies based in the USA have contradictory results. For example, Griffin and Heidorn (1996) in Florida showed that failure on the Minimum Competency Test (MCT) significantly increased dropout rates and that applied more to academically bright students. But the results of the longitudinal study carried out by Warren and Jenkins (2005) in Texas and Florida came to the conclusion that high school exit examinations were not independently responsible for the higher dropout rates.

Fitzpatric and Yoels (1992) found that state policies on educational expenditure, school structure and students' family structure had significant impact on dropout. It did not examine if these variables differentially affected boys and girls. Suh and Suh (2006) analysed dropout students' educational engagement factors in relation to their degree attainment and concluded that self-concept motivational factors had a long-lasting impact on the likelihood of attaining a degree. McNeal (1997) did not find a significant effect of school climate and academic

emphasis on dropping out, but found a significant effect of pupil/teacher ratio, school size and the composition of minorities in the student body. Ainley *et al.* (1991), in a study based in New South Wales, Australia, found that the academic achievement factor together with the family background factors and parents' expectation predicted students' continuation to higher grades. The schools with fewer traditional academic courses and a lower proportion of non-English speaking background (NESB) students have been found to have better retention rates. This study also came up with gender effects in the findings. In Australia, this study found that girls were more likely to stay in schools. The factors associated with this were achievement, parental expectations and satisfaction with school.

More than half of the studies selected for the literature review used a quantitative approach. Nine studies involved qualitative analysis. Importantly, 15 of the studies included adult as well as pupil perspectives. The USA-based studies involved large-scale cohort studies. These studies, with their focus on school systems, educational policy, and examinations in relation to the likelihood of students' dropout, employed a quantitative approach. These studies did find effects of the school system, but did not settle on gender causes as major factors. However, the studies carried out in the south Asia such as Rothchild (2005), Jain (2006), Seka (2012), Gahima (2012) and McMahon *et al.* (2011) describe school as a gendered cultural institution (Ozkazanc & Sayilan, 2008) in which patriarchy and gender roles operate at several levels and in several ways. They found that a school system within which power and social control (Arnot, 2002) are constantly at play lead to female students' educational exclusion.

In conclusion, the studies examined in this literature review covered a wide range of perspectives related to female students' school outcome and the problem of dropout. Findings spark a debate around patriarchy, power relations and discriminatory labour division as causes of gender inequality (Busse & Spielmann, 2019), with a significant impact on female students' schooling outcome. Education as a route to independence is a powerful concept, found in Anderson Fye (2010). In countries like Nepal, India, Bangladesh and Sub-Saharan countries, school structure, teaching method, assessments and teacher behaviour played a vital role in relation in students' staying in or dropping out from schools. Gender was at the centre of much of this. Whereas in the developed world (such as the USA and Australia) motivational factors,

academic achievement factors, educational spending on schools and students' ethnic composition played equally important role.

Method

Sampling

The Ministry of Education consolidated report (2011) was used to select locations for data collection. Six districts with the highest and the lowest female proportion of dropouts in each geographical region – mountain, hills and Terai (plains) – were randomly selected. Jumla and Sankhuwasabha from the mountains, Rolpa and Kathmandu from the hills, and Rautahat and Jhapa from plains were selected. The first in each pair of districts had the highest and the second had the lowest dropout rates. Six schools were selected (one in each district) using a random sampling method from the 482 high schools in the six districts (see Table 1). Ninety-six (49 male and 47 female) respondents were selected from seven respondent categories using a random sampling method (except for two categories): students in school, teachers, head teachers, parents of students in school, and members of staff from district education offices. For dropped out students and their parents a snowballing method of sampling was used.

(Table 1 here)

Measures

Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the University from which this research was carried out. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents and semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth interviews were conducted in the respondents' own language - Nepali. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated. It was decided that in order to adopt an organised and structured approach to data analysis, a computer-assisted analytical tool such as NVivo would be useful (Jones, 2007). With it a researcher could accomplish the analysis in a more efficient way.

The design of the research instruments was based on three different sources. The first was the literature review. The detailed systematic review carried out in the initial phase of the present study provided a concrete foundation for developing interview topics. From previous studies

based within and outside Nepal, the researcher became aware of the issues and complexities. Interview questions used by previous studies were already tested questions. Such questions were carefully examined to see if they were relevant to the research questions of this study. The second resource was the study research questions and sub-questions themselves. The research questions were key resources in developing interview topics. The third resource was statistics and literature about the educational situation that the government of Nepal published through the education department.

Research Positionality

There are several aspects of my position as a researcher which might be relevant. The first is that I am a male Nepali. I had been involved in teaching in Nepal for over fifteen years before I moved to the UK for university studies. Therefore, I was familiar with the teaching environment in Nepalese schools. This experience made me realise the gravity of the problem and motivated me to embark on this study. Therefore, I acknowledge that I had access to an insider's perspective because I shared understanding of socio-cultural beliefs and practices with some of the participants. At the same time, when I was collecting data, I was in Nepal as a researcher from a UK university.

Ethnically, I belong to Brahmin family, which in Hindu caste hierarchy is placed in the highest position. Personally, I am opposed to such hierarchical division and try to avoid all kinds of behaviours associated with it. However, I acknowledge that this also could impact my conversation with respondents with different ethnic backgrounds, because the participants belonged to a society where such practices still existed. Elwood and Martin (2000, p. 651) suggest 'that race, class, family status, ethnicity and other social identities are important sources of differential power that shape relations between researchers and participants even if they share similar national local or identities. My family status and social class were something the participants could not be aware of, but my looks revealed my ethnicity as people with Indo-Aryan root such as Brahmin and Chhetris bear different looks from those with Tibeto-Burman roots such as Tamang, Limbu and Rai. I relied more on being a Nepali and my ability to speak with them in Nepalese language. I also relied on Nepali culture that encouraged them to

cooperate with someone who comes from afar as a guest. In Nepali culture guests are esteemed as gods (Rothchild, 2012).

The following section describes the data analysis process in detail.

Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded on a portable recording device. After the field work the audio files were saved in the researcher's password protected personal computer and the files in the audio recorder were deleted. No one other than the researcher could access the computer used for saving the audio-files. The researcher listened to the interviews carefully and translated and transcribed them into English.

The issue of the translation's reliability was addressed by an inter-rater reliability test. Audio recordings of two interviews were provided to a Nepali researcher who had the required level of English language competence. The respondents' anonymity was maintained. The contents of the two versions of the transcripts were checked by the researcher and co-researcher. It was found that both versions of transcripts had essentially the same content.

The transcribing of the 96 audio recordings involved active listening which gave the researcher an idea of the broad topics the respondents spoke about. It was also a time when note-taking of prominent issues began. Initially two broad areas – school system factors and socio-cultural factors – were identified. A number of themes were grouped under each of the broad categories during the interpretation of the scripts. As soon as the coding was done, the prominent themes could be identified as NVivo ranked them in order.

Thus, comparison of the views of different categories of respondent was possible. It was easy to find the differences and similarities in opinion between adult and child participants, male and female participants and between the participants of different regions. It was important to acknowledge the dimension of geographical and ethnic variations inherent in the data and adopt it in the data analysis process. The comparison on the basis of intersectionality among respondents was useful.

Results

Major trends in the perspectives of various categories of respondents are presented and interpreted. The insights in their discourse (Berg, 2018) bear useful practical implications for future policy makers, practitioners and researchers.

The data gathered under different themes relating to the school system showed that respondents perceived the examination and evaluation system as the main barrier, and the poor implementation of educational policy as the second strongest cause of dropout. The lack of reward and punishment within the school system was described as a lost opportunity to motivate teachers and students. Although it was picked by the least number of respondents, it could be seen as a vital issue. Thus, the most prominent and the least prominent issues were identified.

Although the issues such as the examination system, poor school infrastructure, practice of corporal punishment, and shortage of staff were gender-neutral, the interview respondents explained why for all those reasons it was more difficult for female students to continue their studies. The following sections summarise this.

The first is the effect of examinations; the Continuous Assessment System (CAS) and the socio-psychological pressure caused by it. It was found that 49 (21 Male, 28 Female) respondents made 61 comments on the topic. Out of them 42 respondents claimed that the examination system had a significant effect on female students' dropout. These respondents argued that examinations caused psychological pressure on students, because of which there were incidents of dropout and suicide. Parents' and peers' responses to females who failed examinations caused feelings of embarrassment and humiliation. Not implementing the continuous assessment system properly had negative effects on students. Females who lagged behind in studies but were promoted to higher grades could not cope with the standard of the curriculum and decided to drop out.

“As a female, I see several barriers for females. There are issues of social pressure, pressure within the family. I think you must have read the news of four girls killing themselves jumping into the river after they failed the school

examinations in western Nepal. Why should they do that? There must be a brutal psychological pressure, an issue of prestige or a pressure within the family and in the community.”

- Female Teacher

Linked to the effect of examination is the issue of policy implementation and monitoring. Fifteen teachers and district education office staff discussed the continuous assessment system (CAS). Teachers raised the issue of poor implementation. The assessment system did not match class size and the teachers did not have the proper skills for carrying it out. The policy guidance was based on the provision of one school within a certain geographical area, but this was not implemented in many remote rural areas. Because of this the distance between home and school caused difficulty for female students. The respondents raised the question of security on their way to and from school and frequent incidents of girl-trafficking.

Similarly, teachers emphasised at least one female teacher should have been in each school, but this was not the case everywhere. Presence of female teachers would make a difference for female students. Lack of such a facility disfavoured females as they were less able to share their personal problems with male teachers. For such reasons, school was an unhelpful environment for female students.

Related to the issue of schools having an unhelpful environment was the issue of not having required amenities. Eleven students (of which four were dropped out) said that a range of infrastructural issues caused female students' disengagement from schools. One simple example was the lack of separate gender toilets. School staff claimed they had such facilities, but interview respondents complained that many schools still did not have them and those that had toilets lacked a water supply and proper sanitation. Many schools had overcrowded classrooms, without fans or any cooling or heating system for extremely hot and cold weather conditions. Schools lacked library and independent study facilities, clean drinking water and

playgrounds. It was found such a lack of resources caused feelings of discomfort and low motivation in students.

The systemic and structural irregularities discussed by the participants was caused by insufficient government funding. Ten interview respondents who were head teachers, district education office staff and teachers claimed that insufficient government funding resulted in shortages of teaching staff in schools and staff in the district education offices. Insufficient funding caused many of the infrastructural issues.

There was a facility of scholarships for females but according to the participants such incentive schemes had insufficient scholarship quotas - the number of needy students exceeded the number of scholarships available. The amount provided per scholarship was also too small and did not help much. Scholarships for female students were also not needs-based. Respondents complained that students from a marginalised caste group such as Dalit got them despite being rich, but so-called high-caste students did not get them even if living in economically poor conditions. When a needy female student did not get the incentive, she would tend to lose interest in her studies. Because of this, the government incentive scheme for females did not yield the results it aimed for.

It was found from the district education office staff that shortage of staff in district education offices was the cause of weak monitoring. The school supervisors had too many schools to monitor. Teachers' accountability was not appraised in a timely fashion. Teachers' and district education office staff's recruitment processes were faulty.

'The major thing to affect us is workload. I have to look after three resource centres. I have to go round about 200 schools. And we get instructions from time to time to submit a report of field visits in three days' time, or two days' time.'

DEO Staff (Male)

Impaired school monitoring and supervision of schools because of the district education offices' shortage of staff affected the quality of teaching, motivation and support to low performers. Fifteen respondents (two DEO staff, three girls who dropped out from school, five students in school and five teachers) said that both teachers and students had low motivation levels. Teachers had low motivation for reasons such as their political affiliation, having too heavy a workload and being preoccupied with activities other than that of their profession. Another reason was inappropriate student-teacher ratios (exceptionally large classes), because of which the teachers struggled with managing classes and there was a lack of additional support for low performing students.

'In the past few years our school lost four permanent teachers' positions when the district office reviewed the teachers' positions in the district. You see, grade nine and ten have 170 and 180 students in them but we have only two sections in each. So, it is not because we did not need teachers, we simply lost the positions. Instead we need more teachers. If we had more teachers, we could split grade nine and ten in three classes each. And obviously teachers could pay more attention to low performing students who eventually get dropped out.'

-Female Teacher

Low motivation in students was also caused by lack of practical elements in curriculum and lack of vocational subjects: Two DEO staff, one head teacher and three teachers raised the issue of impractical elements in the curriculum. Textbooks had activities which were not practical because teachers had limited time to carry them out. The internal and external evaluations in all three terms took away time from classroom instruction. Interview respondents also raised the issue of lack of skill-based teaching, so that after graduating from school, students could undertake jobs. The prospect of unemployment after graduation was also a source of low motivation.

According to respondents, motivation in students and teachers could be better if there was a policy of rewarding better performing students and teachers. The absence of a fair system of reward and punishment was unhelpful. Although only three interview respondents (a DEO staff, a head teacher and a teacher) raised the issue of lack of fairness in reward and punishment in the school system, it was an interesting finding. A fair system of reward and punishment could motivate both teachers and students. If any teaching staff were rewarded, it was not on the basis of their hard work but on the basis of his/her political affiliation or being associated with the judging panel.

'The government should reduce the incentive of those who pull their daughters and sons out of school. It should be assessed if the situation is beyond parents' control. There should be rewards for those parents whose daughters graduate from school successfully. The system of reward and punishment will make parents responsible.'

-Head teacher (male).

An equally crucial issue raised by the respondents was an existence of the practice of corporal punishment and harassment in schools. The current educational policy of Nepal has forbidden corporal punishment, but during qualitative interviews, twelve respondents (two DEO staff, two girls who dropped out from school, three teachers and five students in school) revealed that students still received corporal punishment. This caused reticence in students. According to respondents, reticence was one of the major factors that caused low performing females to drop out. The practice of corporal punishment scared students.

'Some teachers are quite aggressive. Sometimes it seems they come to the classroom with their own tension in their head and when a student asks something, they feel offended and they jump on that student. There are some students who make a noise in class. The teacher loses their temper and hits some others. That discourages students to speak openly to teachers. Some girls feel

intimidated by it, so they never have courage to speak to teachers. This affects students who are poor at studies. They remain poor all the time and eventually drop out.'

-Girl who dropped out from school

Harassment was another issue raised by interviewees. Because of the lack of a proper security system in schools, adolescent female students also experienced harassment from strangers. This discouraged girls from coming to school and induced dropout.

According to nine respondents (five district education office staff, three head teachers and one teacher), the school environment was also affected by unwanted political encroachment. Political influence on academic administration severely affected school systems. The political parties attempted to influence the recruitment of teachers as vehicles to spread their influence among people in the community. This had negative effects on the teaching and learning environment. This factor of encroachment in academic institutions was a new finding.

'The school management committee should be changed as per the change in every other sphere of activities. It normally has shares of political parties and the members with their loyalty to different political ideologies can conflict and the head teacher may have problems. For that reason, the head teacher cannot work freely. The school environment is worsened and student dropout becomes normal.'

-Head teacher (male)

School-parent communication: Fourteen interview respondents (eight parents, one DEO staff, one head teacher, one teacher, two girls who dropped out from school and one student in school) raised the issue that the school did not contact the parents of students who were at risk of drop out in order to find the cause of dropping out and see if that could be prevented.

Among all findings some were unique in nature and not found by previous studies. The findings such as the negative effect of poor implementation of CAS, the effect of political encroachment, and the effect of lack of reward and punishment in the school system were an original contribution to the body of research on female students' dropout.

Discussion

The findings of the research showed a number of problems in the Nepali school system, which was undergoing a period of transition from an old method of teaching and assessment to a new one. The schools functioned within a socio-cultural context which was characterised by gender inequality. The school system claimed to be gender balanced, but in fact showed the omnipresence of gender (Ozkazanc & Sayilan, 2008) caused by socio-cultural reproduction of gender (Arnot, 2002). Theorists who emphasise the socio-cultural reproduction of gender inequality claim that schools contribute towards male dominance (Spender, 1980) and marginalisation of females with persistent discrimination. Several shortcomings in Nepalese schools that disfavoured female students provide empirical evidence for Spender's argument.

The Continuous Assessment System (CAS) was introduced in Nepalese schools in 1990 (Browne, 2016) to complement the Liberal Promotions Policy (LPP), which aimed at reducing drop out and repetition of years (Acharya & Shiohata, 2014). The new system of teaching and evaluation was introduced in Nepal with educational reform programmes that were launched in line with achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All (EFA) goals (Acharya & Shiohata, 2014). The respondents emphasised the effect of poor implementation of the assessment system that alienated low performing female students. Therefore, the student assessment system failed to abolish gender as an oppressive cultural reality (O'Brien, 1983) and achieve gender neutrality.

It was clear that the school environment, and quality of teaching and the assessment system had a strong impact on female students' school engagement and the likelihood of dropout. The findings revealed that conflicting assessment systems helped enhance gender imbalance in educational outcome. A Continuous Assessment System (CAS) was implemented in lower

grades and a formal examination system in higher grades. The low performers confronted tough examinations in the higher grades. The females who failed the examinations got into a process of disengagement as there was no provision for retaking the exam and they did not have parental support in repeating the grades because of their family's educational preference for sons. Thus, female students' decision to leave early strongly correlated to the characteristics of school system (Witte *et al*, 2013).

Respondents argued that the issue of motivation was important. The school environment reinforced educational exclusion in relation to female students. Female students were not encouraged to speak and share their problems with teachers. The infrastructural issues were linked to many other issues. Lack of safe and motivating environment in schools caused discomfort for female students. The lack of separate gender toilets was an issue in some schools. There was the question of sanitation even in schools that had separate toilets for boys and girls. Similarly, the lack of any facility for proper drinking water, lack of a library and independent study facility and the lack of playgrounds caused discomfort and low motivation in students. Orpinas and Raczynski (2015) pointed out that dimensions of school climate included the sense of physical and emotional safety and the quality of teaching and learning. Lack of physical and emotional safety in Nepalese schools was caused by weak funding support from the government.

Female students' feelings of disengagement were also caused by excessively large class sizes. The females who required individual attention and additional support felt excluded. Because of this they remained low performers, causing feeling of frustration and low self-esteem. Respondents also raised the issue of corporal punishment which scared female students. They remained quiet even if they had problems. Such signs were precursors of female students' dropout.

The findings also revealed that teachers' accountability was affected by their political affiliation and their involvement in non-professional affairs. Political encroachment was rampant in public schools and at different levels of educational administration. Teachers did not get 'professional support'[CITATION Ked07 \l 2057] because of unavailability of professional development

opportunities. Therefore, they had low motivation. Motivation is an important psychological factor. Therefore, a low motivation level drove the thoughts and actions of teachers as well as students (Fan & Wolters, 2014) in the wrong direction. Thus, the school system was unable to operate as a co-ordinated unit in relation to dealing with the indicators of dropout.

Most of the respondents' concern was that the new system introduced by policy and the objectives set by the new curriculum conflicted with the norms and resources available in the school system. For example, only some teachers were trained to implement the continuous assessment system (CAS) and they were to carry out the assessment in a class of 40 pupils. Students' took CAS as something which promoted them to the new grade even if they did not meet the required level of learning achievement. Parents took the assessment system for granted.

The findings revealed that teachers who had taught for over a decade were reluctant to switch to any new method of activity-based teaching prescribed by the new curriculum. Teachers complained that there were too many activities and teachers had limited time to carry them out. So, the curriculum was impractical. The government changed the policy to maximise the learning outcomes and to improve the retention rate of male and female students. But the problem was that the school system was not prepared for it. In spite of modernisation efforts, the research findings of this study show that schools in Nepal embody socially and culturally prejudiced values (Pherali, 2011). This caused conflict between modernising projects and the values inherent in Nepalese educational institutions and in the socio-cultural environment.

Respondents suggested that the examination system had a link with female students' dropout. The poorly implemented examination system's effect was particularly on academically marginal students. A confusing assessment environment interacted negatively with students' achievement goals (Alkhurusi, 2008), especially for those who struggled with their learning. Whether it was CAS or a formal examination, the assessment system affected these students. The respondents argued that poorly implemented CAS caused these marginal females to encounter the challenge of tough examinations in higher grades. Such students were most likely to fail the examinations. If they failed, they would have to repeat the grade while their fellow

students were promoted to higher grades. The failure would bring psychological pressure on female students because parents began to think of their daughters' marriage.

The findings suggested that the reflection and reproduction of socio-cultural gender imbalance was a defining characteristic of Nepalese educational institutions. Such findings reinforced an argument that patriarchy and power was the cause of female oppression and female subordination. This could also function in the form of an interaction between economy, class and gender that caused gender inequality (Stromquist, 1990). Timsina (2011) argued that gender hierarchy operated strongly across each caste, and in each household, and defined woman's status.

Like Timsina, Bennet (2005) argued that the individual's access to resources and participation in socio-economic and educational activities in countries like Nepal were determined by their social identity (in terms of gender, ethnicity, language, religion, etc.) rather than personal characteristics (such as strength, intelligence and willingness to work). Particularly, social complexities such as gender, hierarchy and power relations created barriers not only in access to education for females but also in completing school education (Timsina, 2011). The current educational policy aimed to raise female students' school completion rate but was unable to do so. The reason was that the structures of educational institutions were not yet inclusive. The hierarchical structures deeply entrenched in the educational systems constantly created barriers for female students.

Limitations

A major limitation of the present study was that during the fieldwork, people were recovering from disastrous earthquake trauma. Consequently, only one school in a district was selected for data gathering. Two or more schools would have given urban/rural variation within each district. The district education offices could not provide an up-to-date record of the dropout rates of individual schools within each district. So, this study had to use a random sampling method for selecting schools. If such information had been available, the most affected schools could have been selected, which might have enhanced the validity of the data and the generalisability of the findings.

In sampling, male students and teachers for interviews were selected randomly from the total male population, and female respondents for those categories were selected from the female population. But the same method was not used for parents and DEO Staff because it was difficult to be in touch with parents and the DEO staff did not have enough female staff. This was another limitation. Interview respondents raised the issue of the need for a fair government policy to address the disparity of resources in private educational institutions and public schools. Privately funded schools were not included in the study as the literature indicated that the problem of dropout was acute in public schools. Their involvement would have given the private school teachers, students and parents' perspectives of the issue.

This study aimed to include policy makers and curriculum developers as respondents but could not do so because of time constraints. Their inclusion would have added yet another perspective on the issue.

Recommendations for future researchers

This study has several findings about the effect of the school system and assessment system on female students' drop out. But such findings need to be expanded further by future researchers. Intervention studies would be more valuable. The following points will be useful for future researchers:

- This study collected data from only one high school from each district location. Future researchers exploring the issues of dropout should collect data from at least two or more schools from both urban and rural areas. This will provide an opportunity to compare findings between urban and rural areas.
- This study focused on exploring factors that caused female students' dropout from high schools. Future researchers can focus on dropout in both primary and secondary schools and compare the findings between primary and secondary schools.
- Further exploration can be done to investigate the correlation between political influence in schools and the quality of teaching. Similarly, further research can be carried out to find the relation between the quality of teaching and drop out behaviour.

- This study aimed at exploring the effect of the school system and assessment on female students. Future researchers can explore the effect of the school system and assessment on both male and female students.
- This study did not select respondents from privately funded schools. Future researchers can include respondents from both private and public schools in order to compare and contrast the perspectives of respondents from the two different school systems.
- This study explored the effect of the overall school system and assessment on female students' dropout. However, future researchers could have a sole focus on finding links between the assessment system and dropout behaviour.
- This study has its focus on female dropouts in Nepal. Future researchers could have a cross-country comparative study with a scope of broader South Asian comparison.
- It would also be interesting if case studies of individual dropped-out male and female students were included in the study.

Conclusion

The findings point to the fact that the state education policy has weaknesses. Implementation of policy initiatives to encourage gender equality is also weak and politicisation in educational activities has a significant impact on female students' retention. In several issues, respondents contradicted one another, resulting in a body of conflicting interview discourse (Berg, 2018) to analyse. The study welcomed such contradictions that helped examine the issues from multiple standpoints and neutralise biases. The findings clearly indicate that the gender issues the policy aimed to address still remain unresolved. Therefore, several infrastructural issues and gender biased environments within the school system continue to reproduce socio-cultural inequality and cause poor retention rates of female students (Arnot, 2002).

On several issues, children's views differed from those of adult participants. For example, students argued that female students did not get as much support as they required from parents and teachers. According to them, teachers never encouraged girls to share their problems. Teachers and parents disagreed with students. Teachers and parents argued that they

never wanted female students to be quiet and were always ready to support them. It was the students' fault for not asking for help. Such contradicting views portrayed a picture of a fractured support system in Nepali school system and its effect on female students.

Teachers and students had differing views about the quality of teaching and provision of additional classes. The students complained that teachers ignored their classroom teaching because they wanted students to be compelled to attend their additional support classes where they charged students large fees. Female students from low economic family backgrounds could not afford to attend these classes. Such female students ultimately lost confidence and decided to quit their schooling. But teachers rejected such complaints saying that they ran such classes only after they received requests from some parents.

Another example of such differing perspectives was that some district education office (DEO) staff (particularly those from Kathmandu and Jhapa) denied that there were problems in implementing educational policy and that it impacted female students' school retention. They defended the policy in practice, saying that it was very good and was bringing good results. But the other stakeholders did not agree with such views and discussed numerous problems.

To sum up, the public-school system requires substantial action to uplift the quality of teaching and support systems in order to improve female students' school retention. The government should equip public schools with the required infrastructure and the appropriate number of male and female teachers in schools. The most important thing for the government is to keep educational institutions away from political interference. The government should conduct an impact assessment of the scholarships and incentives (Bowes *et al.*, 2016) provided to female students and students from marginalised groups of people. School-parent communication and parents' involvement in their children's schooling needs to be a main focus. The public schools need to bring more and more parents into schools on a regular basis and launch parental awareness activities. Thus, the public schools would not only carry out their usual teaching activities but also be centres of social-educational activities. This will help avoid the existing hierarchies and inequalities existing in society and in schools which compel girl students to drop out.

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Table 1**Details of Category-wise Sample Size for Qualitative Interviews**

Districts	Jumla	Rolpa	Rautahat	Kathmandu	Sankhuwasabha	Jhapa	TOTAL
Respondents							
DEO staff	2(1M*,1F*) ¹	2M	2M	2 (1M 1F)	2 M	2 M	12
Teachers	4(2M 2F)	4(2M 2F)	4(2M 2F)	4 (2M 2F)	4(2M 2F)	4(2M 2F)	24
Head Teacher	1 M	1M	1M	1M	1M	1F	6
Parents of girls/boys in school	2(1M 1F)	2(1M 1F)	2(1M 1F)	2(1M 1F)	2(1M 1F)	2(1M 1F)	12
Parents of dropout girls/boys	2(1M 1F)	-	2 F	1 M	2 (1M 1F)	-	7
Students in School	4(2M 2F)	4(2M 2F)	4(2M 2F)	4(2M 2F)	4(2M 2F)	4(2M 2F)	24
Dropout girls/ boy	1 F	2 (1M 1F)	4 F	1 F	1 F	2 F	11
TOTAL	16	15	19	15	16	15	96

1 *M=Male *F=Female